Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness

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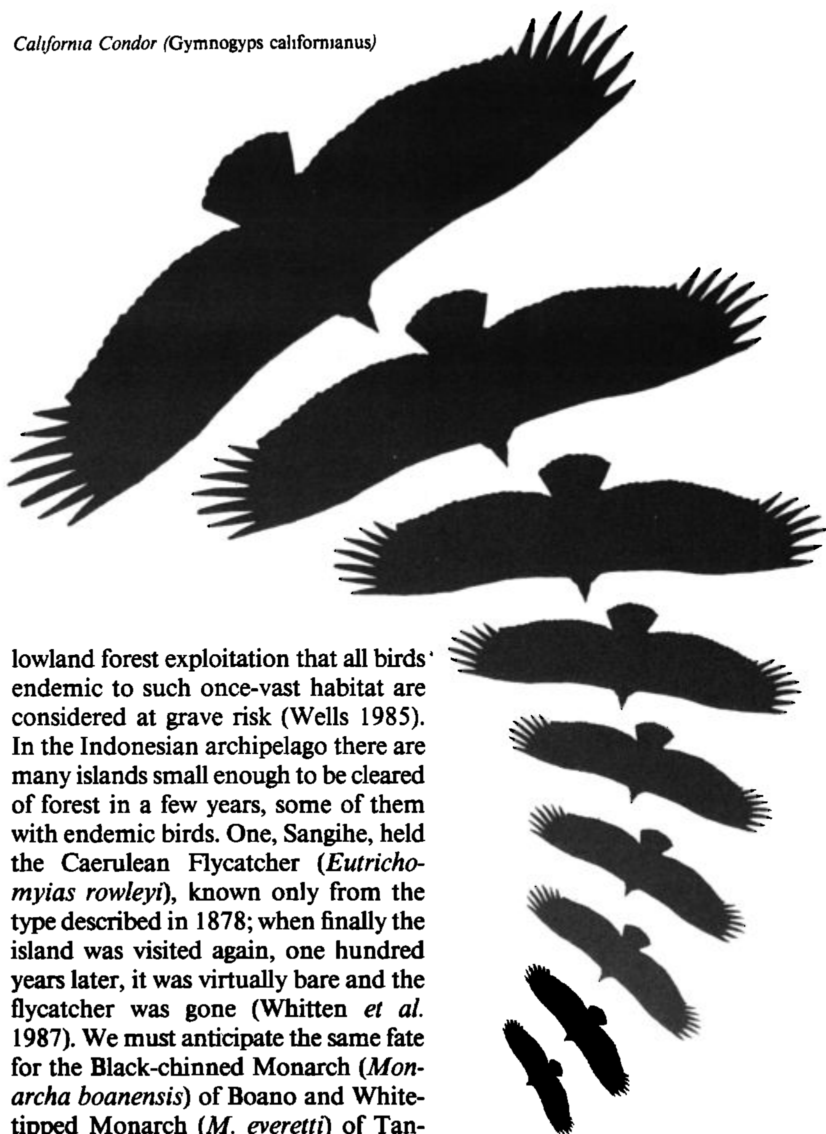
CONSERVATIONISTS HAVE BEEN SAYing it for a decade or more now: we are entering a period of mass extinctions, and we ourselves are to blame. Plants and animals are disappearing from the earth inexorably, increasingly. There are too many, in relation to our current resources, to keep watch over: some of them go despite our watching, others are gone the next time we look, others still will have lived and died in our total ignorance of them. If insufficient is done, we must expect to lose forever thousands of vertebrates, tens of thousands of plants, and hundreds of thousands of invertebrates in a spasm of destruction that is already well underway.

Recent work within the International Council for Bird Preservation's Red Data Book program, which identifies, documents, and monitors all the birds in the world at risk of extinction, suggests that no fewer than one thousand of the earth's nine thousand species of birds are in some way threatened (Collar and Andrew *in press*). Disproportionate though this may seem, our analysis derives from the knowledge and judgment of the best qualified sources. In the New World alone upwards of 350 species are in danger, as testified by almost as many contacts and correspondents who have been providing data for our forthcoming *Threatened Birds of the Americas.*

Already in the 1980s we know the New World to have lost the Colombian Grebe (*Podiceps andinus*) and the Atitlán Grebe (*Podilymbus gigas*), and we cannot hold out much hope for the Imperial Woodpecker (*Campephilus imperialis*), Kinglet Cotinga (*Calyptura cristata*), Cherry-throated Tanager (*Nemosia rourei*), or Semper's Warbler (*Leucopeza semperi*), none of which has been seen for years. The California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*), Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*), Little Blue Macaw (*Cyanopsitta spixii*), Imperial Amazon (*Amazona imperialis*), Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*), Socorro Mockingbird (*Mimodes graysoni*), and Bachman's Warbler (*Vermivora bachmani*) all hang by well-publicized threads That makes an unlucky thirteen, recalled pretty much at random, but there remain, unquestionably, hundreds more, even discounting subspecies: the deciduous forest birds of Ecuador and northern Peru, the rarer elements of the Atlantic forest avifauna of Brazil north of Rio de Janeiro, the Paria Peninsula endemics of Venezuela, certain *Polylepis* specialists in the Andes, primary grassland dwellers throughout the Neotropics, over-hunted cracids, over-traded parrots and a multitude of species with dangerously restricted ranges.

It is a similar story in other parts of the world. In Southeast Asia such has been the intensity and pervasiveness of


California Condor (Gymnogyps californianus)

lowland forest exploitation that all birds endemic to such once-vast habitat are considered at grave risk (Wells 1985). In the Indonesian archipelago there are many islands small enough to be cleared of forest in a few years, some of them with endemic birds. One, Sangihe, held the Caerulean Flycatcher (*Eutrichomyias rowleyi*), known only from the type described in 1878; when finally the island was visited again, one hundred years later, it was virtually bare and the flycatcher was gone (Whitten *et al.* 1987). We must anticipate the same fate for the Black-chinned Monarch (*Monarcha boanensis*) of Boano and White-tipped Monarch (*M. everetti*) of Tanahjampea, as both these islands are now thought to be void of forest, as by recent report is Kolombangara in the Solomons, home to the warbler *Phylloscopus amoenus.* With the help of seasoned American travelers like Jared Diamond, Robert Kennedy, and Ben King, we estimate that there are probably now about 42 threatened birds in Papuasia, 35 in the Philippines, and 43 in China.

Clearly there is a crisis, and clearly habitat destruction is the cause; but if the problem of habitat destruction were easy to remedy, the crisis would long since have been dispelled. It is not. Its causes can be traced back along various routes from the proximate to the ultimate, from the ax in the hand of the landless peasant to the pen in the hand of the faceless bureaucrat, from the displacement of people in Mozambique to the movement of capital in Tokyo, from the bulldozers of the lumber company to the bedframes in the furniture store, from the ill-fated dam to the ill-gotten debt, from need to want and back again. It becomes virtually impossible to isolate the critical factor—injustice, avarice, ignorance, incompetence, overpopulation, underdevelopment, the entire world economy—and equally difficult to identify the appropriate remedy.

The farther back the causes extend, moreover, the harder it becomes for the original issue to attract the attention and sympathy of those who ultimately hold the power to resolve it; and worse still, if by good chance or sheer persistence such people are found who are prepared to listen, they almost invariably turn out to be much less able to help than you had imagined. They may indeed be sympathetic, but their responsibilities are governed by budgets, timetables, precedents, courtesies, regulations, plans and commitments wholly beyond their purview to alter. Sympathy is very nice, of course, but it is patently not enough.

Given the often serious practical obstacles to achieving conservation, the community of conservationists has found itself ever more concerned to provide theoretical explanations of the importance of its cause. In international negotiations, in particular, it is increasingly difficult to implement any conservation measure, which anyway will require some definite material *quid pro quo* to make it work at the local level, without first setting it in a general context of principles that meet the approval of the national representatives of the people. We necessarily have to attain this common ground of understanding and acceptance on which parties with entirely different interests and agendas can meet. In parallel, therefore, with the proliferation of project work around the world, a body of ideas and argument that generalizes and justifies the value of conservation has been accreting at such a pace that simply keeping up with it is almost now a specialist interest.

That, at any rate, is my excuse for not having done more than skim recent books by Hanson (1986), Norton (1986a), Rolston (1986), and Taylor (1986). I was grateful to see, however, the essay by Naess (1986) who, in seeking to explain why "high-level experts and most others do not propagate their strong views on conservation in public," identified time taken away from professional work and fear of insufficient competence as two of the main factors. People at the practical end of conservation should draw much encouragement from the maturation of environmental ethics as a discipline and public issue; but as it inevitably generates its own internal debates, so it becomes academic, arcane and—I mean no disrespect—immaterial.

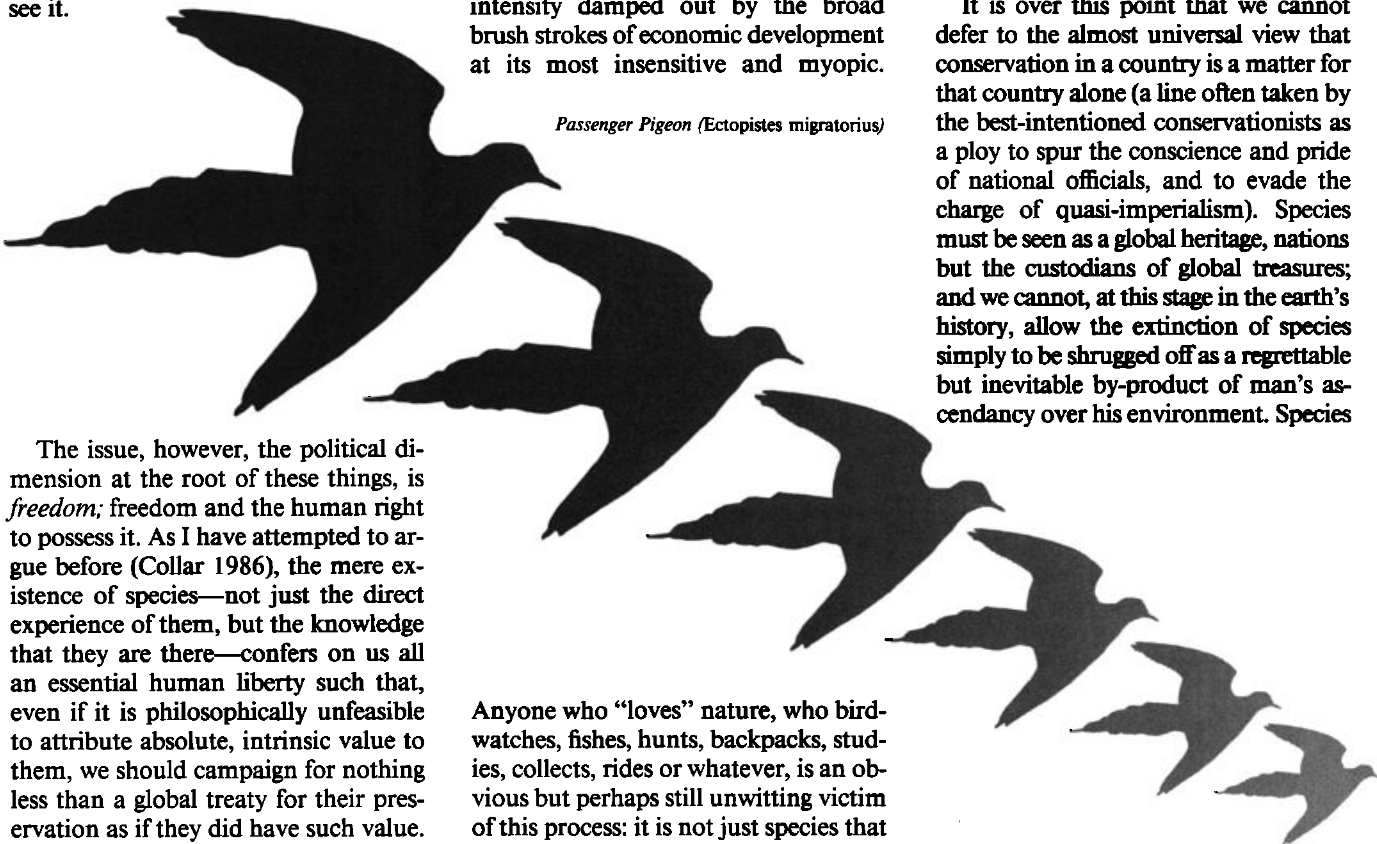
Meanwhile, we need simple, clear reasons why the conservation of species matters, arguments that people can grasp and articulate and warm to. The view of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources has been that species, as part of genetic diversity, are "necessary to sustain and improve agricultural, forestry, and fisheries production, to keep open future options, as a buffer against harmful change, and as the raw material for much scientific and industrial innovation" (1980). Norton (1986b), however, sees this utilitarian tack, that

all species may one day be found a use, as merely one of several, others being: that ecosystems (assemblages of species) perform valuable functions for people (purifying water, stabilizing soils, sustaining air quality), that ecosystems provide aesthetic satisfaction, that species loss may indicate imminent ecosystem collapse. The alternative to such relative, anthropocentric valuation is to think in terms of the intrinsic or absolute value of species, to confer upon them their independent right to exist, and to insist that consequently man has unbreachable obligations towards them.

These themes are evidently developed and debated in the volumes I mention above, but neither in them nor in other expositions I have glanced at does there appear to be an interest in exploring and expressing something much simpler and more direct: the political dimension of that which motivates conservationists and their sympathizers. The motivating factors may be love of nature (a hopelessly fragile stick to beat any conscience with), the kinship that is "biophilia" (Wilson 1984), the pursuit of wilderness and the authentic (Meltofte 1987), or even the "contact with a wider, more inclusive being" (Skutch 1987), all of which are important aspects of the issue as I see it.

This may seem severe, dramatic, even far-fetched, but the tunnel-vision of our everyday lives prevents us from getting the global crisis into perspective. A friend, a university teacher of zoology, once said to me in a gloomy discussion of the fate of rainforests, that if they all go he might as well go, too: to know so measurelessly rich a source of interest and beauty and mystery exists, and to see it erased as if it were a tape, would cripple his sense of purpose and engagement too painfully to make life worth continuing. I imagine many other people would feel much the same, but the trouble for most of us has been that the changes in the world, though incredibly rapid on an evolutionary scale, are still insidiously slow in terms of our individual life-expectancy: we get accustomed to the small annual diminution of our potential birding life-list, the newspaper reports of cataclysmic Amazonian destruction, the glossy small-screen wildlife films almost glorying in their latest eschatological footage.

We have to wake up *now* to the fact that the natural environments of our finite earth are being destroyed, finally, *now*. The world is being drained of meaning. Our lives are steadily turning a featureless gray-brown, the texture of concrete and bedrock, with all color and intensity damped out by the broad brush strokes of economic development at its most insensitive and myopic.



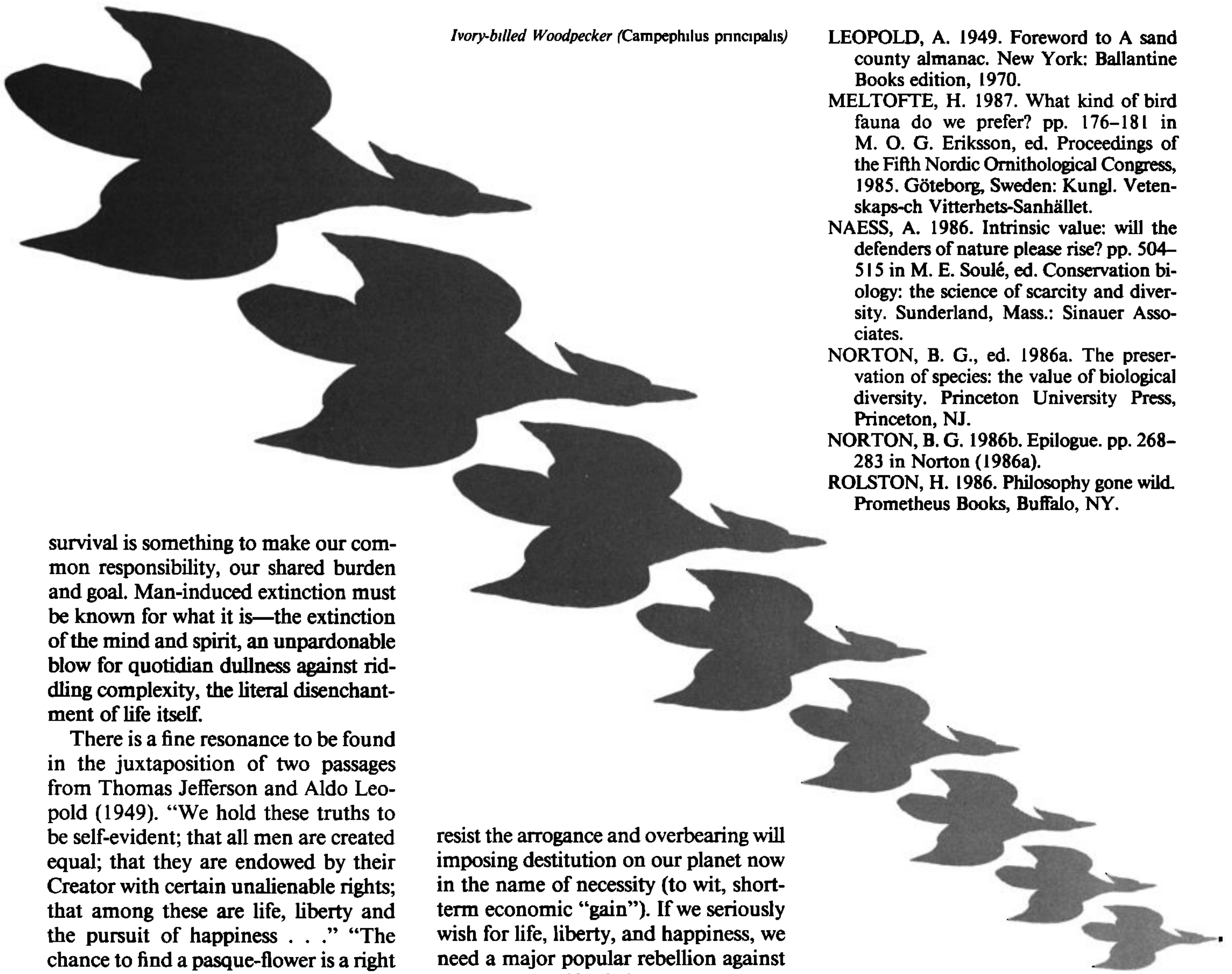
*Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*)*

The issue, however, the political dimension at the root of these things, is *freedom;* freedom and the human right to possess it. As I have attempted to argue before (Collar 1986), the mere existence of species—not just the direct experience of them, but the knowledge that they are there—confers on us all an essential human liberty such that, even if it is philosophically unfeasible to attribute absolute, intrinsic value to them, we should campaign for nothing less than a global treaty for their preservation as if they did have such value.

Anyone who "loves" nature, who birdwatches, fishes, hunts, backpacks, studies, collects, rides or whatever, is an obvious but perhaps still unwitting victim of this process: it is not just species that we are losing, of course, but subspecies, populations, ecosystems, areas, individual plants and animals. We value them for the pleasure they bestow, whatever form it takes (and I include here the pleasure of scientific inquiry no less than that of emotional uplift). When these things disappear, our capacity for pleasure is accordingly reduced, our horizons narrow, our lives diminish.

In other words, our freedom is taken away from us; and it is time that we began to convert our sharp feelings of loss as this happens into something much more potent than the mere defeatism of grief or regret. There are, no doubt, practical limits to the claims we can make on behalf of our interests, although at the national level such limits are considerably broader than at the international. Once events in another country become the subject of concern, rights of self-determination throw up a familiar cordon of disincentives to the meddlesome; but while it may be prudent in most cases not to become embroiled in issues over populations, subspecies, or areas and even ecosystems, if only of local importance, there has to be a point of principle, internationally approved, that species survival is paramount.

It is over this point that we cannot defer to the almost universal view that conservation in a country is a matter for that country alone (a line often taken by the best-intentioned conservationists as a ploy to spur the conscience and pride of national officials, and to evade the charge of quasi-imperialism). Species must be seen as a global heritage, nations but the custodians of global treasures; and we cannot, at this stage in the earth's history, allow the extinction of species simply to be shrugged off as a regrettable but inevitable by-product of man's ascendancy over his environment. Species


*Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*)*

survival is something to make our common responsibility, our shared burden and goal. Man-induced extinction must be known for what it is—the extinction of the mind and spirit, an unpardonable blow for quotidian dullness against riddling complexity, the literal disenchantment of life itself.

There is a fine resonance to be found in the juxtaposition of two passages from Thomas Jefferson and Aldo Leopold (1949). "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . ." "The chance to find a pasque-flower is a right as inalienable as free speech." This is the essence of the creed we must hold to, the honest admission of our own stake in life—as Wilson (1984) observes, "the only way to make a conservation ethic work is to ground it in ultimately selfish reasoning"—and hence a route by which to bring the best in our values of care and appreciation into the ethical basis of policy in all nations.

The vigilance that global conservation organizations seek to exercise is the price to be paid for the freedom we all cherish. The situation of so much wildlife on earth is now so nearly terminal that the choices are becoming starker by the year: if the earth is to retain its ancient riches, if the quality of our lives is to be ransacked no further, then we must be ready to stand up for the earth and for *ourselves.* This may indeed be selfish reasoning, but it is not arrogance, or the will to impose unjustly on others; it is no more than what is needed to resist the arrogance and overbearing will imposing destitution on our planet now in the name of necessity (to wit, short-term economic "gain"). If we seriously wish for life, liberty, and happiness, we need a major popular rebellion against the modern drift of history, and a massive renewal of support for global conservation and its champions. These are things the concerned, considerate citizens of the earth now have to unite for, and fight for.

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